

exhibition preview

# Central Nigeria Unmasked

## Arts of the Benue River Valley

Marla C. Berns and Richard Fardon

**FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA, LOS ANGELES, CA**  
**FEBRUARY 13–JULY 24, 2011**

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, WASHINGTON, DC**  
**SEPTEMBER 14, 2011–FEBRUARY 12, 2012**

**CANTOR ARTS CENTER AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY, STANFORD, CA**  
**MAY 16–SEPTEMBER 2, 2012**

**MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY, PARIS**  
**NOVEMBER 12, 2012–JANUARY 27, 2013**

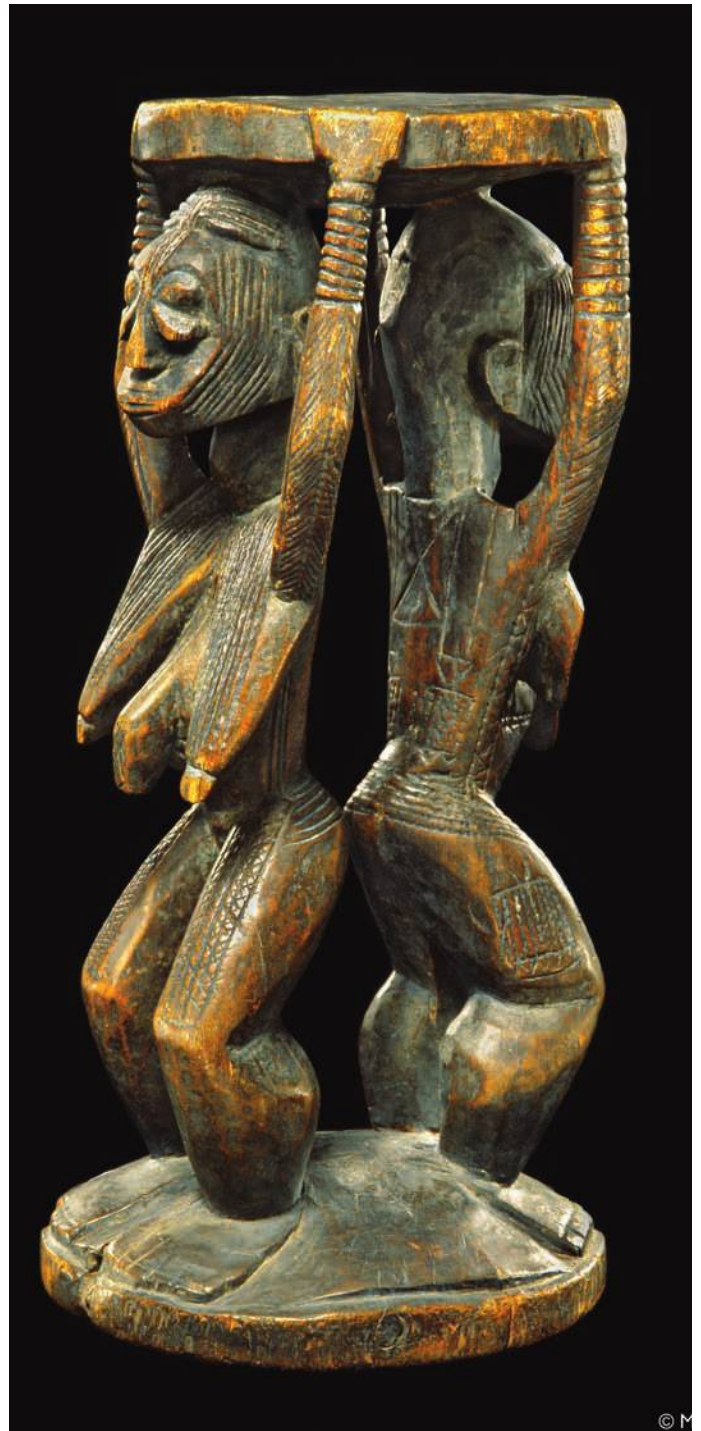
The 650-mile-long Benue River—the largest tributary of the great Niger—flows across the geographic center of Nigeria. Unfolding as a spectacular journey up the Benue, “Central Nigeria Unmasked” introduces for the first time the major artistic genres and styles associated with more than twenty-five ethnic groups living along the river’s Lower, Middle, and Upper reaches. These diverse and remarkable artworks include sculptural forms in wood, ceramic, and metal. Among them are full-bodied maternal images; sleek columnar statues; helmet masks with naturalistic human faces; horizontal masks that appear as stylized animal-human fusions; imaginatively anthropomorphized ceramic vessels; and elaborate regalia forged in iron and cast in copper alloys. All of these varied objects had meanings and purposes crucial to Benue Valley peoples as they confronted life’s challenges.

Taking the course of the Benue River as a metaphor, “Central Nigeria Unmasked” highlights the ways that artworks—their movements and malleability—bear witness to histories of exchange and interaction between local communities, concentrating on the late nineteenth to late twentieth century. Artistic genres were rarely confined to particular peoples, places, or even contexts of use. Artworks might be made by one group and used by another; the meanings and purposes of the same artworks might change within a locality; newly adopted objects might be reinvented in particular ways; stylistic traits or approaches, rather than specific objects, might be shared; and objects may have been collected from places they were originally neither created or used. In contrast with projects that have tended to use individual works or categories of object to generalize about or stand-in for the identities of their makers, this exhibition, when possible, seeks to unmask the “life histories” of artworks, which were seldom simple. Their complex itineraries, extending from Nigeria to museums, galleries, and private collections in the West, frequently involved multiple actors (creators, practitioners, initiates, traders, collectors, and scholars) who have influenced how we have come to understand them.

“Central Nigeria Unmasked” and the publication that accompanies it present two remarkable legacies whose full significance has begun to be appreciated only with the passage of time. The first is that of the artists of the Benue River Valley, whose works are presented here in their most comprehensive and detailed survey to date. The second is that of the art historian Arnold Rubin (1937–1988) who between 1964–1966, as a young doctoral student, carried out fieldwork extensively throughout the Benue River Valley and intensively on the people called the Jukun, whose history has usually been seen to hold a key to that of the region as a whole. Gaining his doctorate in 1969, Rubin



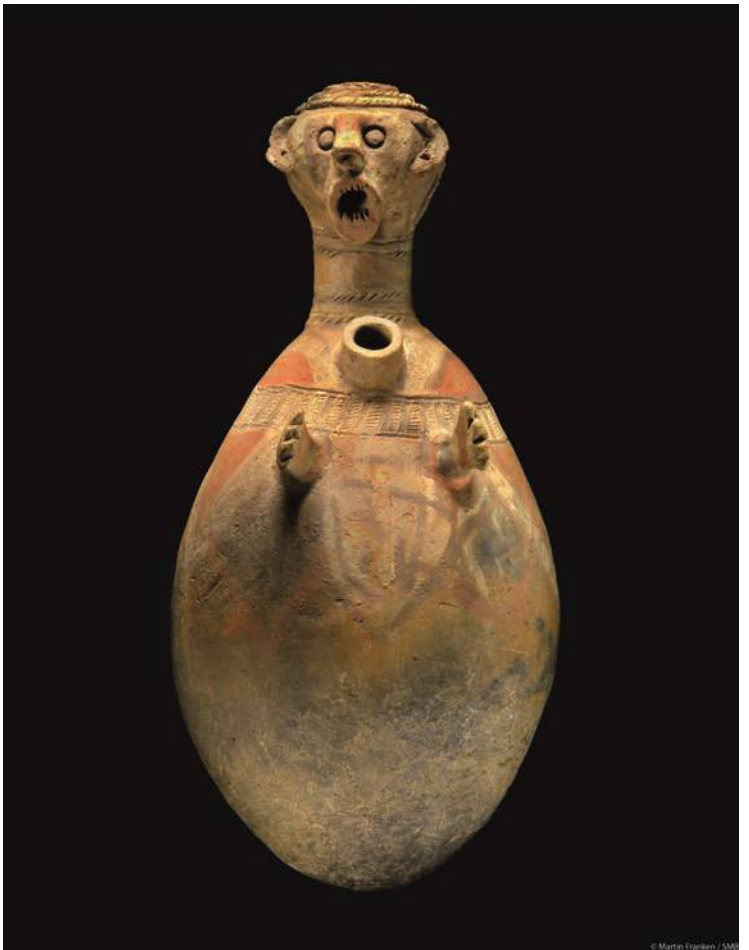
**1** Royal helmet mask (Agba)  
Igala peoples, Lower Benue, late 19th–early 20th century  
Wood, polychrome; H: 34cm (13½")  
Collection of Liliane and Michel Durand-Dessert  
PHOTO: COURTESY LILIANE AND MICHEL DURAND-DESSERT, ©HUGHES DUBOIS



**2** Double caryatid  
Lower Benue, nineteenth century  
Wood; H: 57cm (22½")  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, III C18455  
Collected by Captain Hans Glauning, Wukari, 1904  
PHOTO: MARTIN FRANKEN, 2010, ©STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN,  
PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ, ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM

These two remarkable artworks are from the Lower Benue region. Their stylistic similarities are notable: elaborate patterns of facial striations and large heavily lidded eyes. In this case, however, the resemblances do not necessarily suggest that the artworks were made by the same peoples. More importantly, they reveal that objects and ideas can travel, often making it difficult to ascertain the ethnic identities of their makers or users (which might be different). The helmet mask was worn in masquerades that honored the royal lineage of the Igala peoples. Others like it, however, have been documented among the Jukun, who live about two hundred miles up the Benue. Likewise, the double female sculpture, used to hold food offerings or held aloft in performance, was collected in the Jukun town of Wukari. Such objects are, therefore, better understood as belonging to a regional, and hence larger, sphere of influence and interaction.

returned to deepen and broaden his survey of the region's arts between 1969 and 1971. While also pursuing other interests, he continued to write about the arts of Central Nigeria throughout the 1970s, and by the 1980s he was planning a major project under the title "Sculpture of the Benue River Valley," whose intent was to show how the art forms and styles of its peoples provided evidence for their history. As Rubin wrote in the introduction to the draft manuscript he prepared for the book, looking at similarities and differences in the forms, functions, and meanings of Benue objects contributed to building a his-





(opposite, clockwise from left

**3 Figure**

Mumuye peoples, Middle Benue, 19th–20th century

Wood, twine, pigment; H: 160cm (63")

81.17.709; Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company

PHOTO: ELIZABETH MANN, 2010

In the Middle Benue region, figurative sculptures were used as intermediaries in ritual contexts where they could stand in for particular ancestors, the collective dead, or powerful spirits who were human-like in appearance. Mumuye figurative sculpture tends to be bold, angular, and dynamic in conception. When Mumuye sculpture first entered the Western art market in the late 1960s, its distinctive abstract form caused a sensation.

**4 Horizontal crest mask (Mangam)**

Kantana/Kulere peoples (?), Middle Benue, early 20th century

Wood, pigment; H: 55cm (21¾")

Musée du quai Branly, (Paris, 73.1997.4.46)

PHOTO: THIERRY OLLIVIER/MICHEL URTADO/SCALA, FLORENCE, ©2010 MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY

Across the Middle Benue, horizontal masks were carved to emphasize the dramatic conceptual fusion of the animal and the human, the wild and the domesticated. This work, in the form of a dwarf forest buffalo or "bushcow," was worn horizontally on top of the head with a bulky costume made of layers of stiff palm leaf. It performed in masquerades that served a number of purposes, primarily healing diseases and averting misfortune. The "scarification" incisions along the crown of the mask reference its humanity. The elegance and economy of this buffalo crest appealed to European artists and collectors, beginning in the early twentieth century.

**5 Protective vessel (*kuchan*)**

Jen peoples, Upper Benue, late nineteenth century

Ceramic; H: 52cm (20½")

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, III C16939

Collected by Baron von Uechtritz and Siegfried Passarge, Cameroon, 1894

PHOTO: MARTIN FRANKEN, 2010, ©STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ, ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM

Decorated and anthropomorphized ceramic vessels of the Upper Benue stand in stark contrast to the wood sculptures and masquerades of the Lower and Middle Benue regions. This figurative vessel was kept in a community shrine where appeals were made to protect men who went into battle or to hunt large game. This is the earliest field-collected object in this exhibition, acquired during the German expedition of 1894, led by Baron von Uechtritz and the geographer Siegfried Passarge.

(this page)

**6 Standing male figure**

Pan Benue, 1566–1616 (thermoluminescence testing, 400 yrs +/- 25%)

Copper alloy; H: 44.7cm (17½")

Private collection

PHOTO: BENJAMIN WATKINS © COURTESY OF PRIVATE COLLECTION

The Benue is home to an array of fascinating and little-known objects cast in copper alloys. Such objects are among the most portable of Benue art forms, and the river was likely a highway for their transport, as well as for the movement of specialist artists who cast them. Exciting to contemplate is the probable age of this figure—over four hundred years old based on scientific testing of its inner clay core. Its date places it within the historical context of other well-known bronze-casting industries in southern Nigeria, such as those of the ancient kingdoms of Ife and Benin.

tory of art where "written documents, sequences of monuments, and other conventional art historical resources are unavailable." Before his untimely death in 1988 Rubin had outlined an exhibition and had begun a census of objects in collections. The project's completion has taken those who inherited it more than twenty years, a reflection on how much we have had to learn, and just how complicated the effort was, becoming even more complex as artworks surfaced in international collections and changed hands over this period.



"Central Nigeria Unmasked" aims to meet at least some of Arnold Rubin's ambitions, and does so in large part by drawing heavily on his research, especially on the Middle Benue region and most specifically on the Jukun-speaking peoples, and incorporating his field notes, photographs, film recordings, and collection (most of which was donated to the Fowler Museum).<sup>1</sup> In 2005, when the Fowler Museum—under the leadership of Marla C. Berns—resumed work on the Benue Valley project, it did so in association with the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, which has a large and distinguished Nigerian collection, with many important Benue objects, acquired from the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva (Jean-Hubert Martin et al. 1997). Hélène Joubert (Curator of African Collections, Musée du quai Branly) joined the three lead specialist curators of the project, who had been involved since the 1980s, each with scholarly expertise on one of the constituent Benue subregions—Sidney Kasfir (Lower Benue; Professor of Art History, Emory University, Atlanta); Richard Fardon (Middle Benue; Professor of West African Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); and Marla C. Berns (Upper Benue; Director, Fowler Museum at UCLA). The publication accompanying the exhibition includes major contributions by the three lead curators along with essays written by many other scholars in order to provide a comprehensive view of the primary research accomplished on Benue arts and culture over the past fifty years.<sup>2</sup>



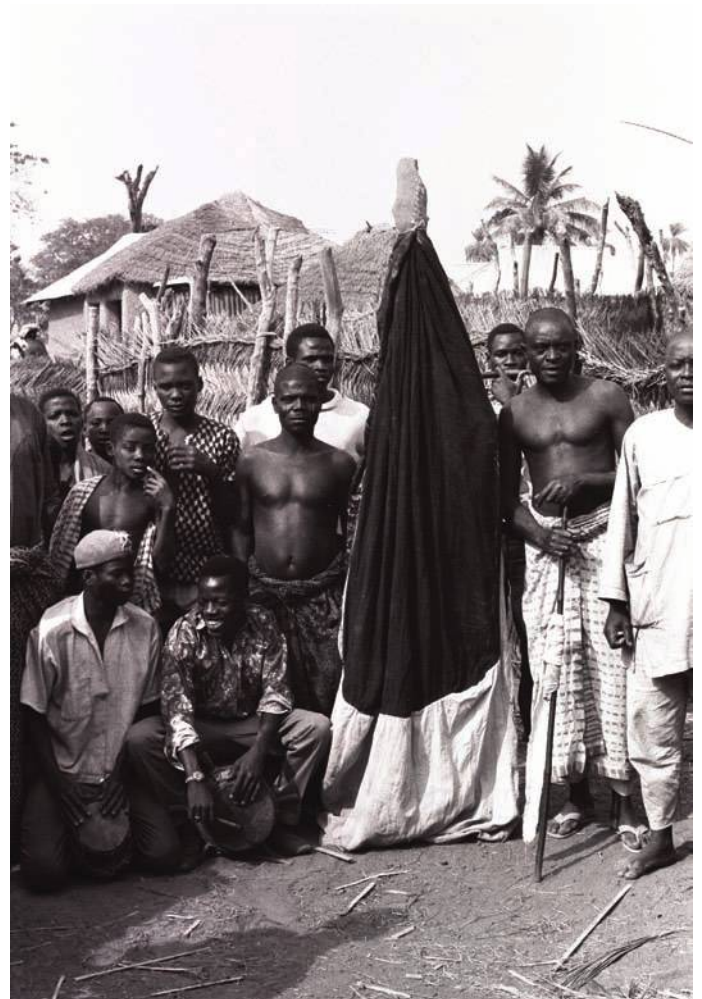


**7** Oba (active 1930s–ca. 1950)  
Shrine figure, Anjenu  
Idoma/Akwéya peoples, Otobi village  
Wood, string, beads, pigment; H: 67cm (28¼")  
Fowler Museum at UCLA; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Kuhn  
PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

The Idoma artist Oba, who lived in the village of Otobi, carved this female shrine figure, called an Anjenu. Anjenu figures attracted nature spirits that dwelled in the Benue and other local rivers and were kept on shrines where offerings could be made. This sculpture by Oba lacks the finesse of the other well-known Otobi artist, Ochai (see Fig. 11), who may have been his mentor. Their relationship seems to have been exceptional since no formal apprenticeship system existed among Idoma carvers.

**8** This photograph shows an lwagu “tall ghost” masquerader in the Alago-speaking village of Assaikio in the Lower Benue region. In addition to funerals of important men, it appeared to ensure good crops and community health. January 11, 1971, Assaikio village. Rubin archive, Fowler Museum at UCLA, neg. 2993.

PHOTO: ARNOLD RUBIN



## ARTS OF THE BENUE VALLEY

Living at the very center of Nigeria’s Middle Belt, the peoples of the Benue River Valley created works of art in a variety of forms, which in many ways reflect their geographic and historical position. The Idoma and Igala of the Lower Benue, living towards the confluence with the Niger River, were demonstrably influenced artistically by contact with the peoples of southeastern Nigeria and the Cross River. As we ascend from the Niger-Benue confluence towards the Middle Benue, we find that artworks, particularly figures and masquerades, become increasingly distinctive from those of neighboring peoples, whether to the north or the south. It is here and in the Upper Benue that the ethnic composition of groups is at its most complex, and resemblances in art forms and styles suggest intensive exchange alongside the emergence of idiosyncratic traditions that speak of local innovations. In the Upper Benue, the most isolated of the Benue Valley sub-regions, wood sculpture is nearly absent and distinctive sculptural ceramic vessels predominate as the focus of religious practices.

As the reader will by now have gathered, the heterogeneity of the Benue River Valley is both part of its richness and among the greatest challenges to its study. Details of local geography, language, ethnography, and history threaten to become so complex that they might become an impediment to an apprecia-



**9** Maternity figure  
Lower Benue (?), collected before 1901  
Wood, metal; H: 70.5cm (27½")  
The Horniman Museum, London, 31.42, Museum Acquisition, 1931  
Collected by Major F. H. Ruxton, Middle Benue, between 1901–1914  
PHOTO: THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM LONDON ©HEINI SCHNEEBELI

**10** Umale Oganegi (active 1940s–1970s)  
Female figure, mid-20th century  
Igala peoples, Dekina  
Wood; H: 60cm (23¾")  
Dr. Richard and Jan Baum  
PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

Umale's style is characterized by a bold simplicity, flat planes with protruding elements, and elaborately incised decoration. Other hallmarks of Umale's style are the darkening of the upper body with a red hot blade or poker and incising a lizard onto the figure's back.

tion of the distributions of regional arts as such. Hence, we have needed to simplify, even at the risk of initially over-simplifying. Organization into Lower, Middle, and Upper Benue subregions is intended to be understood in relative terms and not to suggest that they were hard-edged and impermeable. Yet these divisions are not arbitrary, either: each was, and is, home to peoples with more-or-less shared characteristics who produced artworks that fitted into their particular ways of living in and trying to control the world. The density of resemblances, and we would argue of historical interactions, was greater within each of the subregions than it was between them.



#### BENUE VALLEY GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

In a country most simply typified as having a north and a south, the Nigerian Middle Belt is contextually an "in-between" place. It was too far south for Sudanic Arab chroniclers to have visited, and it was too far north for coastal European traders and explorers to have penetrated before the mid-nineteenth century. The peoples and arts of the Benue have thus received less scholarly attention than was the case with the more accessible ethnic groups of Northern or Southern Nigeria. Before the colonial period, these Middle Belt societies for the most part did not adhere to the world religions (although the leaders of some might be nominally Muslim) but practiced the historic religions of West Africa. The between-ness of the societies of the Middle Belt meant that they retained some cultural autonomy from both the Saharan and Atlantic worlds, but they became increas-





ingly subject to the influence of both as trade, particularly the slave trade, grew in extent, and the world religions pressed more urgently on them from north and south.

The Benue River runs through low-lying floodplain, becoming almost a mile wide during the rainy season at its lower reaches. Extensive plains to its north and south are bounded by mountain ranges. It is an area of long-standing human habitation. Archaeological investigations on the Jos Plateau have revealed a record of occupation going back almost forty thousand years, and many of the known sites of the so-called Nok culture (dating from 500 BCE to 500 CE) are located within the Benue region. Speakers of Africa's major language families (Niger-Congo and Afroasiatic) are found there, and the ancestral forms of the modern Bantu languages spoken throughout central, eastern, and southern Africa probably originated in the Middle Benue. The Benue Valley has not been marginal to African, which is to say to human, history, yet little is known about it before the eighteenth century. Written references to it are sparse and archaeological investigations not yet intensive. There is documentary evidence suggestive of a powerful confederacy called Kwararafa (Kororofa) or Apá, thought to have existed from the fourteenth century in the Middle Benue region, centered near the modern town of Wukari, now a site of Jukun occupation. Kwararafa fragmented in the seventeenth-eighteenth century, after three centuries of periodic attacks against Hausa cities such as Kano. Which people made up the Kwararafa federation, what form the "federation" took, and who were its leaders, remain contentious issues.<sup>3</sup>

**11** Ochai (active ca. 1910–1950)  
Face mask, Ichahoho  
Idoma/Akweya peoples, Otobi village,  
early to mid-20th century  
Wood, pigment, fiber; H: 34cm (13½")  
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht  
PHOTO: ©2010, GREG STALEY

Ichahoho is a warrior's masquerade indigenous to the southern Idoma. The masked performer carries a machete and challenges older men to mock battle. The masquerade today has become an expression of youthful hubris rather than warrior-style aggression. This whiteface mask reveals the influence of neighboring groups, especially the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria.

**12** Crest mask, Oglinye  
Southern Idoma or Cross River  
peoples, early 20th century  
Wood, metal; H: 39cm (15¼")  
The Trustees of the British Museum,  
Af1954,23.1089  
PHOTO: MICHAEL ROW, 2010, ©TRUSTEES  
OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The coiffure on this Idoma mask is reminiscent of the dramatically coiled hair extensions on the skin-covered crest masks made by Ejagham peoples of the Cross River area of south-eastern Nigeria. When performed, the Oglinye was tied to the top of a knitted body suit fully covering the head of the masquerader.



During the nineteenth century, however, dramatic and disruptive events originating in the north and south shook the Benue River Valley and decreased its isolation. First, from the north, came the Fulani jihad, declared in 1804 by the militant reformer Usman dan Fodio, which continued to be felt throughout the century. The nature of this impact was mediated by geography—the open terrain of the Lower Benue Valley made it susceptible to invading jihadists on horseback, while the remote and rugged uplands of the eastern Middle and Upper Benue regions acted as refuges from the advancing forces of change.

The second set of disruptions originated in the south with the arrival of the British around 1840, who initially sought to explore, trade, and missionize. This incursion eventually led to the establishment of colonial rule in 1900 and the imposition of strategies of control and pacification. It also led to the movement and return of some Benue peoples from mountain and hilltop refuges to the plains. The colonial period marked a watershed in relation to the

arts of the region. A great majority of its artworks, as in most other parts of the world until recently, were of religious significance, forming part of the efforts people made to represent and control the forces that affected their well-being, both for good and bad. Changes in life circumstances entailed changes in religious practices. The twentieth century witnessed an overall erosion of historic religious practices in the face of Christianity and Islam. Seen in its entirety the process was slow and unidirectional. However, this generalization misses moments of wholesale conversion and rejection of the past, on the one hand, as well as the persistence of historic religious practices well into the second half of the twentieth century, on the other.

In 1960 Nigeria gained independence and with it came the delineation of states and local government areas. Policies of modernization were also implemented. Running parallel to these changes was the intensification of the work of Christian missionaries and Muslim reformers that had begun in the nine-



**13** Head crest with rooster  
Egbira peoples, mid to late 19th century  
Copper alloy; H: 28cm (11")  
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Russell and Becky Curtis  
Art Purchase Endowment Fund  
PHOTO: TAD FRUITS, INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

This elaborate tiered headdress was worn during funerals and the performer was completely concealed with cloth and netting. In the 1850s, the Egbira kingdoms were overtaken by the expansion of Islamic forces from the north. After Egbira rulers adopted Islam, the production of non-Islamic ritual objects, such as these head crests, was eventually eliminated.



(this page)

**14** Female figure, Ihambe  
Tiv peoples, before 1930  
Wood, pigment; H: 76.2cm (30")  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; Fred and Rita  
Richman Collection, 70.40.234  
PHOTO: MIKE JENSEN, 2010, HIGH MUSEUM OF ART,  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

The patterns of scarification around the navel of this figure reflect those made on Tiv women when they became mature and ready for marriage. The complex designs symbolize the catfish or mudfish.

(opposite)

**15a, b** Helmet mask, Aku Washenki  
Jukun peoples, Arufu village, before 1965  
Wood; H: 30cm (11¾")  
Private collection, Paris  
PHOTO: © PRIVATE COLLECTOR

This mask was photographed by Arnold Rubin in the Jukun village of Arufu in 1965. Masks like it have been documented in subtle variations over a 200-mile distance, stretching to the Niger-Benue confluence zone. Ultimately the mask has become emblematic of a Jukun-related royal dynasty implanted among the Igala.

teenth century. The combination of these factors increased pressure on Central Nigerian populations to abandon local religions as well as the many types of ritual objects associated with them. By the end of the twentieth century, many of the types of objects presented in the exhibition had disappeared from local usage in many areas; others had shifted in form, purpose, or intention or been destroyed, sold, or stolen.<sup>4</sup>

#### KNOWLEDGE OF BENUE ARTS

The so-called exploration of the Benue River by Europeans largely occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of this activity had little bearing on our grasp of the arts of the Benue Valley, and very few artworks were collected or documented during this period. Some expeditions left behind useful records of their forays into the region and a small number of objects (for instance, those of the Germans Edouard Flegel, 1883, and Siegfried Passarge, 1895, or the French Louis Mizon, 1892; see Fig. 5). It is to the twentieth century that we must look for more intensive documentation.

The formal colonization of Nigeria and Kamerun inaugurated a qualitatively different documentation and collection of artworks upon which this project draws heavily. Many of the most important early acquisitions were made before World War I by colonial officers in the course of their duties rather than by specialists. German officers were particularly active at the eastern end of the Valley in what was then Kamerun. Their collections, which often mixed "Völkerkunde" with natural specimens, were sent via the Berlin museums which took first pick of items (see Figs. 2 and 19), the remainder of which reached the museums of other great cities (notably the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart and collections in Dresden and Leipzig, etc.) The most significant of the professional collectors from Germany, the indefatigable Leo Frobenius, traversed both British and German territories during 1911–1912, making the most extensive single collection of the period, which was acquired by all the major German museums. The British woman, Olive Macleod (later Oliver Temple) ascended the Benue River in 1910, in what was a more serendipitous collecting effort, which nonetheless resulted in accessions



to the collections of the British Museum in London and the Liverpool Museum (and several pieces she collected in the Upper Benue region are included in the exhibition). Missionaries and colonial officers in pre-World War I Nigeria made occasional contributions both to written records and collections that are particularly significant for often being the earliest in the archive of artworks and their documentation.

The partition of German Kamerun after World War I put another eastern slice of the Benue Valley under British administration and meant that documentation of its art between the two world wars became a predominantly British affair. This is the period when colonial officers with anthropological interests—including senior officials such as H.R. Palmer, who was at the time Lieutenant Governor of the Northern Provinces, and C.L. Temple (1919), R.C. Abraham, R.M. Downes, and E.S. Lilley, among others—completed substantial work. The most significant researcher for the Benue River Valley was the government anthropologist C.K. Meek, author, at the behest of H.R. Palmer, of a substantial monograph on the Jukun (1931a), as well as a series of studies on many of the peoples of the Benue Valley (largely anthologized in two volumes as 1931b). The early collections made by British colonial officials are represented here with key pieces from the British Museum and the Horniman Museum in London (see Figs. 9 and 23). After World War II more professional expertise was brought to bear on the study of arts. A survey of Nigerian art commissioned from the artist and art teacher Kenneth Murray in 1943 led to the establishment of a Department of Antiquities, of which he became the first director.

A second major wave of collecting occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. An exodus of objects, mainly through Cameroon, occurred during and immediately after the upheavals caused by the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)—also known as the Biafran War—that was fought in the country’s southeastern region over the attempted secession of Biafra. Emerging onto the international art market, many works entered private collections, especially in Europe and the United States, at this time. While we cannot reconstruct the circumstances under which many of these objects changed hands, the “runners” who sold them (primarily to European dealers) often supplied “ethnic” attributions, which explains in part how certain objects came to be associated with particular peoples, even if later those same peoples could not recognize these objects as their own. The terms used to identify objects during this early period of a developing art market were hence out of step with, and considerably less sophisticated than, the discourse on Benue Valley arts, one notably begun by Roy Sieber in the late 1950s and continued by Arnold Rubin in the 1960s.

Fieldwork conducted by specialists since the mid- to late-twentieth century has significantly enhanced our knowledge of the arts and peoples of the Benue region, and a number of objects in the exhibition were photographed and documented *in situ*. Gaps in what we know mean that the identities of other object types are difficult to determine at this remove in time. The inclination to align specific works with peoples living in the places where the works were collected has persisted into the twenty-first century, an approach that makes no allowances for the complicated genealogies and journeys of specific pieces. While scholars can agree





**16** Standing male figure  
Jukun, Wurbon Daudu (?), late 19th–  
early 20th century or before  
Wood; H: 57.2cm (22½")  
Private Collection, Stanford  
PHOTO: ROBERT KATO, © COURTESY PRIVATE  
COLLECTOR

The unusual treatment of the head on "Wurbo" figures, cantilevered over the chest at a radical angle and with a flat and frequently rectangular facial plane, is puzzling. Could these figures be wearing a mask to affect their spirit incarnations? It is possible that Jukun horizontal and plank mask genres served as models for the "mask-faces" on Wurbo figures. This figure carries in its right hand what appears to be a simplified representation of the staff of office associated with Jukun chiefs.

**17** Male figure (Wipong)  
Jukun peoples, Gwana village, late  
19th–early 20th century or before  
Wood; H: 71cm (28¼")  
Robert T. Wall Family  
PHOTO: DON TUTTLE, 2010

This figure was documented in the Jukun village of Gwana by Arnold Rubin in 1965. It represents a chief, named Wipong, who is notably attired with cylindrical ear spools and vestiges of a staff. The exhibition also includes a figure representing Wipong's wife, named Kai. This sculpture reveals the commonalities of Middle Benue figurative styles: columnar torsos, encircling arms, short staccato legs, heads with crests, and minimal facial features.



that distinctions in forms or styles do cluster in ways that make ethnic determinations fruitful, even where documentation is thin, the preference here is to avoid assigning fixed attributions when meaningful collection data is absent and instead to identify the localized spheres in which objects are likely to have circulated.

Without a doubt, the history of collecting strongly colors our knowledge of Benue arts. Colonial collections have been invaluable for their documentation, as mentioned above. In many cases they have assisted in restoring context to objects that exited Nigeria later, mostly without information and before intensive fieldwork was accomplished. We also acknowledge, as mentioned above, that many of the artworks featured here were sold and/or stolen during and in the aftermath of the Biafran War, when traders took advantage of Nigeria's porous eastern border and the calamitous poverty of a war-ravaged country. The same era witnessed the increasing abandonment of local religious systems and the objects that served them. We know

there are questions about the rights and wrongs of actions that largely took place some forty or more years ago, which involved many actors who have disappeared from the stage. What to do in the present? We cannot resolve many issues surrounding proprietorship but as scholars we are conscious of a responsibility to the historic record (see Picton 2010). In this spirit, we have included objects that help us build a more complete testimony to the Benue River Valley's rich and diverse artistic and cultural legacy. We have aimed to reconstruct provenance when possible, whether from direct evidence or by comparison and argument, and without any attempt to conceal the arduous and conflicted journeys of objects. A principle aim of this effort is to unite Benue Valley objects, labeled by as works of art, with the field observations that restore their former significance, so that they can be understood not simply through Western eyes but also through the purposes of those who made and used them.

**18 a, b** Female figure  
Mumuye peoples, before 1969  
Wood; H: 103cm (40½")  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Moore  
PHOTO: SCOTT MCCUE, 2010

Movement is imparted to this Mumuye figure by its flexing—forward from the waist and back from the neck, as well as from left to right—and through its undulating arms and pointed elbows. The large circular ears, which probably identify the figure as female, are perforated, further accentuating the asymmetry of the form. This is one of the earliest Mumuye figures to leave Nigeria, having entered the art market during the Biafran War.



#### INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

“Central Nigeria Unmasked” begins with six key works to introduce the major genres of art distinctive to the Lower, Middle, and Upper Benue subregions as well as the key thematic concepts that are woven throughout the exhibition (Figs. 1–6). The exhibition continues in three main sections corresponding with the Lower, Middle, and Upper Benue subregions. Within each, groupings of objects made by neighboring peoples highlight their shared forms, purposes, and histories. The exhibition also pauses to feature distinctive community traditions and the ways that artists have freely innovated within the parameters of local styles. Maps, field photographs, and films have been used extensively to contextualize and animate the works on view. An introductory digital media presentation is designed to help visitors visualize and locate the Benue River Valley by mapping the region’s varied landscapes, diverse peoples, key artistic traditions and major historical events. Other media components are

included in each of the three geographical subregions, presenting area maps, local history, and sequences of images and/or film clips to contextualize the objects on view. All of the multimedia content of the exhibition is available online via the website of the Fowler Museum ([www.fowler.ucla.edu](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu)).

#### THE LOWER BENUE: FLUID ARTISTIC IDENTITIES

The area around the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers has been the home to a changing constellation of peoples over many centuries. Today it is where the Igala, Ebira, Idoma, Afo, and Tiv peoples live, among others. The lower stretches of the Benue have long been both a pathway and barrier: a path of escape, trade, or migration, but a barrier against advancing armies and other intruders. The incursions of the Fulani dislodged peoples from the north side of the Benue who fled to the south, often with their important ritual objects. They gradually regrouped into new communities and exchanged ideas and



forms with their new neighbors, especially the Igbo and a number of groups living in the Cross River area. Also among their new neighbors were the Tiv, who expanded from the southeast in present-day Cameroon into the Lower Benue region prior to the nineteenth century. In so doing they created a wedge between peoples living there who had shared histories, especially when they formed a sizable part of the Kwararafa confederacy.

These destabilizing events help explain the fluid identities of artistic traditions that span the Lower Benue and its open frontier with the Middle Benue. Maternal sculptures predominate (Fig. 7), often carved with one or more children, and were used to safeguard women's health and fertility. They also protected the earth, which was conceived as female, and the well-being of crops. The use of these sculptures throughout this region speaks to their power and efficacy and makes it difficult to assign specific ethnic affiliations to works lacking documentation. Certain distinctive Lower Benue masquerades were also highly mobile, perhaps none more so than the powerful ancestral incarnations in which performers were fully enveloped in burial shrouds and prestige textiles (Fig. 8). They are represented in the exhibition through a mapping of field photographs and a large-scale projection of dramatic film footage, some taken within the past year, to trace the pathway of the "tall ghost" masquerade among a number of peoples living along the Benue River and westward beyond its confluence with the Niger. Within this section specific objects offer the opportunity to tell fascinating stories of

meaning, history, and interaction, exposing the forces that have shaped artistic identities over time and space.

Across the Lower Benue, community and individual shrines focus on promoting the health of women and children and the fertility of the fields. The sculptures in these shrines took the form of full-breasted females, seated and standing, some with arms raised as caryatids, and others with children on their laps or backs (Figs. 7 and 9). These sculptures could also be displayed and carried during harvest festivals. Their widespread distribution is strong evidence of precolonial networks of production and exchange across both sides of the river from the Lower to Middle Benue regions. Our ability to identify particular sculptural forms with specific peoples is complicated by the fact that the places where maternal sculptures were initially documented might not be the same as where they were originally made or even used.

The now-famous maternity figure in the Horniman Museum (Fig. 9), which has a complex history, is a case in point. The sculpture was donated in 1931 to the Horniman Museum by a British colonial officer, Major F.H. Ruxton, who collected it "somewhere in the Middle Benue between 1901–1914." During the colonial period it was attributed first to the northern Yoruba and the Idoma peoples. In the 1950s, British art historian William Fagg assigned it to the Afo, a canonical identity it has had ever since. Sidney Kasfir, however, recognized the uncertainty of these proposed identities and has suggested instead that this sculpture and others related to it (including the Berlin double-





(opposite, l-r)

**19** Double columnar figure

Chamba peoples, before 1903

Wood, cordage; H: 45cm (18")

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, III C19023; collected by Captain Hans Glauning, 1903, in Tim Däsi village

PHOTO: MARTIN FRANKEN, 2010, ©STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ, ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM

The figure on the right with the tall, flat-topped coiffure is female and the one on left with the crest is male.

**20** Soompa (active 1920s–1940s)

Male-female double figure

Chamba peoples, Mapeo, ca. 1940

Wood; H: 54cm (21¼")

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 2005.77; gift of Robert and Nancy Nooter

PHOTO: TRAVIS FULLERTON, ©VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Sompa's female figures have angular, flat-edged crests, while those on his males are rounded, with serrated edges. The double-figure sculptures are said to be a married couple, and they were found in the apparatus of several different ritual associations.

(this page)

**21** Male and female pair (*kundul*)

Wurkun peoples, early to mid-20th century

Wood; H: 55cm (21¾")

Private collection, Los Angeles

PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

*Kundul* sculptures were produced on the directive of priests who told patients seeking their help to procure them for use in ritual treatments. Some were commissioned to protect a mother and her infant after a breech birth or to protect a hunter haunted by the spirit of an animal he had killed.

caryatid in Fig. 2) were part of a cross-regional Lower Benue tradition where shrine sculpture had greater mobility than previously assumed. The dispersion of communities caused by the Fulani jihads of the nineteenth century meant that genres previously linked to certain localities spread to wider circles of patronage and exchange.

There are several known artists from the Lower Benue region whose work dates to the early to mid-twentieth century, and the exhibition draws special attention to them. For example, the Igala artist, Umale Oganegi of Dekina, has a highly recognizable personal style that reveals innovation even within a fairly circumscribed set of artistic parameters for carving figures in this subregion (Fig. 10). He was so well known and admired that people would sometimes attribute work to him that was clearly carved by other artists. The work of the famous Idoma artist Ochai (who died around 1950) was first documented in 1958 by Roy Sieber and later in the 1970s–1980s by Sidney Kasfir. Unlike most other artists, Ochai was a full-time sculptor and had commissions from many villages beyond his own. He carved several genres of Idoma figures and masks, some of which are represented here (Fig. 11).

In a section entitled "Boundary Crossing: The Circulation of Masquerades," the exhibition turns to the diverse masquerades performed throughout the Lower Benue, from those incarnating ancestors, to those enforcing social codes, supporting royal and chiefly authority (see Fig. 1), celebrating warriors (Fig. 12), or to

entertain. Circumstances of war, migration, and resettlement since the nineteenth century have meant that masks were and continue to be highly mobile. They could be taken as war booty, bought and sold, adopted with or without accompanying rituals, and altered to suit aesthetic or social requirements of a new community. Reinterpreted by new owners, their meanings changed in response to different contexts and needs. As cultural boundary crossers, masquerade traditions also retain some traces of where they have been. Their names, origin stories, accompanying musical instrumentation, idiosyncratic dance steps, or special adornments are all clues to their historical paths.

Dramatic masks were worn in masquerades honoring the royal lineage of the Igala peoples (Fig. 1). Unlike other mask styles in the Lower Benue, these masks are likely to have originated in the Middle Benue region around the historic confederacy of Apá (also known as Kwararafa/Kororofa), which broke up in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. This caused several groups to migrate westward along the Benue, carrying masquerades with them. The exhibition shows that the masks went on to have a "second career" as emblems of a cosmopolitan Igala dynasty transplanted to the immediate southeast of the Niger-Benue confluence. Later in the exhibition a strikingly similar helmet mask is displayed, which was documented by Arnold Rubin in a Jukun village nearly 200 miles to the east (see Fig. 15).

The influence of Igbo, Ibibio, Boki, and other Cross River peoples is especially apparent in Idoma masquerades, particularly the

## 22 Vertical mask

Wurkun/Bikwin peoples, late 19th–early 20th century or before

Wood, palm oil, pigments; H: 129.5cm (51½")

Robert T. Wall Family

PHOTO: DON TUTTLE, 2010

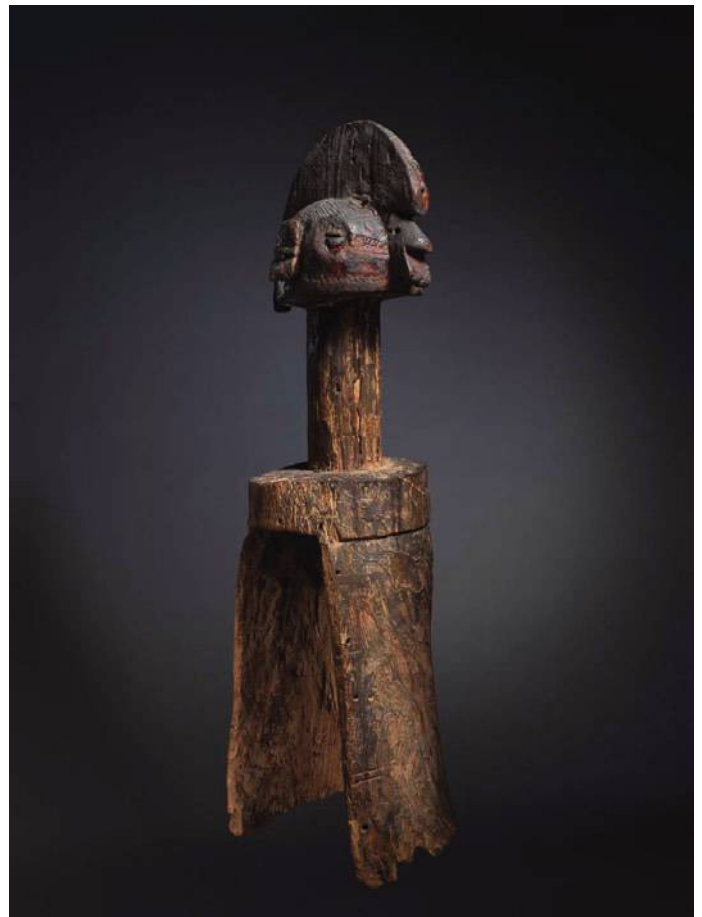
The vertical masks associated with the Wurkun and Bikwin peoples living north of the Benue River in the Muri Mountains were kept hidden in caves to preserve their secrecy. The only eyewitness account of a vertical mask like this one comes from an American missionary, C.W. Guinter, who saw as many as sixteen masqueraders wearing "large wooden" masks in one memorial rite in 1925. This impressive example could have been worn on top of the head with the performer's face turned sideways and holding the lower planks to keep it steady. It seems to have been carved intentionally to "read" differently from the front and the side views, which may have something to do with how it "walked" and was seen in performance.

whiteface mask so recognizable from southeastern Nigeria (Fig. 11). Crest masks in the form of human heads carved fully in the round were made for warriors' masquerades, called Oglinye (Fig. 12). The tradition derives from the Cross River area, where human trophy skulls were originally worn atop the head. The British banned Oglinye in 1917, but after 1940 they tried, largely unsuccessfully, to use the masquerade groups to assist with local efforts at social control and to help collect taxes and enforce orders. This example illustrates the dynamic life history of an Idoma masquerade genre, whose roots resided elsewhere and whose local uses and meanings shifted over several centuries in response to changing historical circumstances.

Other crest masks from the Lower Benue region were cast in copper alloys, and one made by Egbira artists, who live in the Niger-Benue confluence area, incorporates a rooster—known as a messenger of deities and a signifier of abundance—in its elaborate superstructure (Fig. 13). Centers for casting a range of bronze and brass regalia, weaponry, and standing figures have been identified across the Benue corridor, from its confluence with the Niger to its upper reaches near the Cameroon border. The Benue and its connecting waterways provided veritable highways for the movement of objects, and those cast in copper were among the most portable. While we may know where some originated, for many others it is impossible to identify their sources or makers.

The exhibition next turns to the Tiv, relative strangers to the Benue River Valley, who expanded into the region from the southeast. Their beliefs and material culture reveal their outsider status. Distinctive to them are Ihambe (Fig. 14), sometimes large, nearly life-size figures, which were erected at the entrances of houses where women had been married "by exchange." This ideally involved two men exchanging their full sisters in marriage; practically, it gave rise to complications that persuaded the British to ban the practice in 1930. The Ihambe were a special kind of *akombo* (or religious emblem), which conferred protective powers upon the couple.

To the east of the Tiv live the Jukun-speaking peoples, who are dispersed in communities on both sides of the Benue, with Wukari, situated south of the river, as their capital. Their arts,



and those of their neighbors, the Goemai, provide a bridge between the Lower and Middle Benue subregions. As mentioned earlier, a dramatic helmet mask, called *Aku Washenki* (Fig. 15), documented in 1965 by Arnold Rubin in the western Jukun village of Arufu, bears an unambiguous relationship to Igala royal masks. Its purpose in Arufu was as the female of the husband-wife pair in the *Aku* masquerade, and it also had connections to chieftaincy. Without field documentation it might have been easily attributed to the Igala. Instead, this mask supports the close historical ties the Jukun had with Lower Benue peoples.

We are calling one rather idiosyncratic style of Jukun figurative sculpture "*Wurbo*" (Fig. 16; see cover) because of its association with the town of Wurbon Daudu located south of the Benue River. Like the distinctive helmet mask described above, it too has affinities with both the Lower and Middle Benue areas. Formally, *Wurbo* sculptures are reminiscent of Lower Benue maternities, but in their purposes they are similar to sculptures used in rituals by Middle Benue peoples, including other Jukun populations displaced to the northeast of the Benue River (Fig. 17).

## THE MIDDLE BENUE:

### VISUAL RESEMBLANCES, CONNECTED HISTORIES

The largest and most ethnically and geographically complex of the Benue subregions is the Middle Benue. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the establishment of Muslim Fulani states and the simultaneous intensification of slave raid-



**23** Horizontal mask (Nam-Gbalang)  
Chamba Daka peoples, 1921 or before  
Wood, plant fiber; H: 72cm (28½")  
The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1922, 0610.1;  
Collected by Captain Eric S. Lilley prior to 1922,  
Muri town, Nigeria  
PHOTO: MICHAEL ROW, 2010, ©TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH  
MUSEUM

This fine example typifies the western Chamba style. Chamba horizontal masks are the only ones to enclose the head of the wearer, who would have seen through an opening between the planks of the long flat snout. The mask boldly fuses human and animal elements, and its hybrid nature is echoed in its passage from the "bush" to the village where it performs. It superimposes a human skull, at its center, with an animal skull, running from its mouth to its horns. The facial features are distinctively human.

ing dramatically impacted the diverse peoples living there. These events were followed by further disruptive outside influences in the form of British colonization and the arrival of Christian missionaries starting in the early twentieth century, which made it difficult to reconstruct who had lived where a century earlier.

Most contemporary ethnic identities within this area crystallized only during the colonial period, because the British needed them for administrative purposes, and local people embraced them out of a sense of belonging. The works of more than ten of these culture groups—with an emphasis on the Jukun, Mumuye, Chamba, Wurkun/Bikwin, Goemai, Montol, and Kantana/Kulere—are featured in this section of the exhibition.

Distinctive to the Middle Benue region are three primary artistic genres: sculptures in human form, hybridized human-animal horizontal masks, and remarkable vertical masks that may have functioned as "walking sculptures." The striking resemblances among the objects made by neighboring peoples speak to historical relationships and ritual alliances. All across the region, wooden figures served as intermediaries in rituals aimed at healing and protecting the community, especially from such crises as epidemics, drought, and warfare. Similarly, horizontal and vertical masks were used in performances associated with funerals and remembering the dead, initiating youth (a preoccupation of Middle Benue peoples not shared by those of the Lower Benue), ensuring or celebrating a successful harvest, or healing the sick.

The Middle Benue section of the exhibition opens with a dra-

matic display of figurative sculptures made by neighboring peoples, which were conceived to stand in for particular ancestors, the collective dead, or spirits of the wild, who were all taken to be human-like in shape. Middle Benue figurative styles are decidedly different from the favored maternal image of the Lower Benue. Male and female figures, their gender typically identified by the shapes of their head crests, are geometric in approach—especially those made by the Jukun (Fig. 17), Mumuye (Fig. 18), Chamba (Figs. 19–20), Wurkun (Fig. 21), and Montol peoples. Despite their correspondences, sculptures associated with particular groups exhibit sufficient stylistic differences to reveal the impacts of local innovation and invention.

For example, the "ritual intermediaries" made by the Jukun recalled prominent past chiefs and their wives, to whom offerings were made to seek well-being or to avert misfortunes. In 1965 Arnold Rubin documented seven figures in Pindiga and twenty-three in Gwana, Jukun villages located in the hills north of the Benue River at the frontier of the Upper Benue. In Gwana particularly, the figures were kept in rock shelters and had been left to decay. The town was also in decline and its compounds deserted. Rubin predicted that most would be dispersed soon after he saw them, and many were collected for Nigerian museums. Other examples are now in private collections, reaching Europe by 1967 and having changed ownership in the intervening years; one of Rubin's field photographs documents two of them in the exhibition (Fig. 17).

Mumuye peoples also used figurative sculpture in activities to gain protection from drought and epidemic diseases as well as to promote a successful harvest. They were known to aid the Mumuye "Master of Rain" and were used as oracles or to reinforce the status of important elders. A flood of Mumuye sculptures reached the art market starting in the late 1960s, causing a sensation, especially after their exhibition at the Galerie Majestic in Paris in 1968 (see also Fry 1970). Since then they have been much celebrated for their abstraction and inventiveness, and ten examples have been selected to show their striking variety and dynamic conception (Figs. 3 and 18). Part of their attraction is that they are highly recognizable and at the same time very different one from the other. Female figures are often indicated by large perforated





**24** Male horizontal mask (Vaa-Bong)  
Mumuye peoples, collected by Arnold  
Rubin in 1970  
Wood, pigment, hibiscus fiber; H: 198cm  
(78")  
Fowler Museum at UCLA, Gift of Jim and  
Jeanne Pieper  
PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF  
FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

Mumuye horizontal masks perform in exclusively male groups or together with a "wife." The mask evokes its animal nature with distinctively rounded mouth plates and upswept horns. Subtle embellishments reference its humanity: small hair knots and tiny incisions emulating scarification. These masks performed at agricultural rites, funerals, and the initiation of young men into the Vaa-Bong ritual association.

**25** Antelope mask ("big" Mangam)  
Kantana peoples, Mangur village, before  
1965  
Wood; H: 70.1cm (28")  
Collection of Mark Groudine and Cynthia  
Putnam  
PHOTO: ©2010 ADAM L. WEINTRAUB

This "big Mangam" was photographed in situ by Christian Duponcheel in 1965 in the Kantana [Mama] village of Mangur. It has unusually tall and straight horns, which emerge directly out of the crown of the head. The surface has been rubbed with a red powder and the patina on the horns suggests long-term use.



earlobes and male figures by their helmets with high crests and/or flaps. Based on their numbers in collections, Mumuye artists must have been numerous and prolific.

Single and double columnar figures were used among the Chamba peoples, and many had iron points that were inserted into the ground or a piece of wood (Fig. 19). Examples were collected by German colonial officers during the early twentieth century, but by the time of Independence many of the religious institutions of which they were a part were in decline. In counterpoint, we also feature the work of the Chamba artist Soompa of Mapeo village, who was active from the 1920s to 1940s. Richard Fardon and Christine Stelzig have identified a corpus of about fifteen single and double figures carved by Soompa, three of which are included in the exhibition (Fig. 21; see Fardon and Stelzig 2005). The artist's distinctively volumetric approach to the human form is unlike other Chamba columnar sculptures. His double figures have the torsos of a male and female sharing a single hip plinth and pair of legs, one of the most original inventions in the Middle Benue.

Among the most enigmatic art forms in the Benue River Valley are the large and dramatic vertical mask configurations used by several neighboring peoples living on both sides of the Middle Benue River—the Warkun/Bikwin groups (Fig. 22), the Mumuye, and the Jukun. They are enigmatic because of their form—some of them clearly cannot be “worn” easily since the space between their lower planks is almost too narrow for a person's head to fit—and because there are no detailed field observations about how they were performed. We surmise that in some cases the performer stood inside the support and balanced the mask on top of his head, holding the planks to keep it steady and seeing through a vision port. Others with solid planks would have been worn with the head turned sideways to see. Still others must have been carried by one or more men. These objects were likely to have functioned less like conventional “masks” than as “walking sculptures,” appearing during harvest and planting festivals to bestow blessings of agricultural success and community well-being. Among the Warkun/Bikwin groups, they also incarnated ancestors who returned to the human world in spectacular ceremonies. It is not hard to imagine the impressive appearance of these towering impersonations—lumbering en masse slowly forward or sideways, with their heads soaring high above those of the living. In scale, their only counterparts would be the “tall ghost” masquerades made of cloth, found primarily in the Lower Benue and Niger-Benue confluence area.

Masks worn horizontally on the head are found across the Middle Benue, and the exhibition displays a selection of examples together to reveal their strong formal commonalities: each has a central helmet, or cap, where the wearer's head is covered; backward horns; and a frontal snout in various shapes.<sup>5</sup> In their forms and meanings they fuse references to animals and humans, the wild and domesticated. The resemblances between masks made by the Chamba (Fig. 23), Mumuye (Fig. 24), Jukun, Yukuben, Kuteb, and Kantana/Kulere (Figs. 4 and 25) peoples are evidence of a set of broadly shared religious concepts. These ideas and their materialization as masquerades must have spread across the region long before the nineteenth century. With few exceptions, the masks performed in rites of passage (particu-



**26** Rainmaking wand  
Mumuye peoples, mid-20th century  
Iron; H: 58cm (23")  
Private Collection, Los Angeles

PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

Mumuye rainmakers were held in awe. They brought the rains on time each year to assure the fertility of crops. Among their ritual instruments were forged iron wands in elaborate form, with several pointed iron elements bundled in clusters. Such regalia were kept upright in the ground inside shrines where offerings could be made.



larly the initiation of young men, the individual and collective remembrance of the dead, and the shifting of seasons). Arnold Rubin's films, shot in 1965 and 1970 and screened here as a sequence of edited clips, provide a rare opportunity to witness Mumuye, Jukun, and Chamba horizontal masks in performance.

Among the various horizontal hybrid masks, those made by a cluster of peoples living in the escarpments south of the Jos Plateau are the most numerous and diverse. Called Mangam, they were made by the Kantana (Mama), Kulere, Sha, Rindre, and others and were used in ritual contexts associated with healing diseases, marking rites of passage, or securing agricultural success. They took two distinctive animal forms: those with tall and upswept horns refer to waterbuck and reedbuck antelopes ("big" Mangam; Fig. 25), and those with circular horns stand in for the dwarf forest buffalo or bushcow ("small" Mangam; Fig. 4). Artists could vary the form by utilizing the natural branching of tree limbs or by adding a small human face at the end of the snout. Despite their powerful animal aspect, subtle embellishments, like lines of scarification, indicate their hybrid human aspects.

It is not surprising that these boldly proportioned crest masks captured the attention of artists and collectors early in the twentieth century. A "bushcow" Mangam very similar to the one in Figure 4 was featured in the 1935 exhibition *African Negro Sculpture*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The large number of masks that exists in collections, along with more than one

hundred photographed in the field in the 1950s and 1960s, exhibit a stunning degree of variation, and the exhibition features a group of seven examples to demonstrate this.

Across the Middle Benue region—and elsewhere along the Benue corridor—the most important markers of ritual authority were often embodied in forged iron spears, rattles, knives, or wands. Iron's ancient legacy not only provided critical tools of life, such as implements and weaponry, but could also serve as a means of communicating with powerful spirit forces. Among the Mumuye, iron wands were used in rainmaking, taking a distinctive zigzag form (Fig. 26), which represented a flash of lightning or the sudden strike of a snake, both harbingers of thunder and rain. Smiths, some of whom were also smelters, everywhere in the Middle and Upper (but not Lower) Benue occupied a marked status within society due presumably to their power to transform raw material into finished metal objects through the use of fire. Such ironworks, and their corollaries in cast copper alloys, are highly portable objects, likely to have been traded down the Benue River or produced by resident smiths or regional specialists according to prescribed forms.

#### **THE UPPER BENUE: EXPRESSIVE AND RITUAL CAPACITIES OF CLAY**

Due to its relative isolation, the Upper Benue is distinct from other areas of the river valley. Its rugged, hilly terrain pro-



(opposite, l-r)

**27** Vessel to protect a pregnant woman and her fetus (*jina bitibiyu*)

Cham-Mwana peoples, late 20th century

Ceramic; H: 26cm (10¼")

Musée du quai Branly, Paris, 73.1998.12.6

PHOTO: THIERRY OLLIVIER/MICHEL URTADO/SCALA, FLORENCE, ©2010 MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY

This vessel type is idiosyncratic, built with a "blind-spout" in the form of an open-mouthed head emerging at a diagonal from the side of the vessel. It was used by women to protect the fetus or to cure illnesses associated with pregnancy. A wide-open mouth offered easy and direct access for the transferred spirits.

**28** Spirit vessel (Mbir'thleng'nda)

Ga'anda peoples, Gabun, Hurgabun family, before 1980

Ceramic; H: 38cm (15")

Fowler Museum at UCLA X2008.32.1; Museum

Purchase

PHOTO: DON COLE, 2010, © COURTESY OF FOWLER MUSEUM AT UCLA

This vessel is unusual for its wavy "arms," surrounding the raised central ridge of "scarifications," as well as for the absence of any applied iconographic elements. It illustrates the variability of the deity's surface decoration and the idiosyncratic approach of the artist who made it.

(this page)

**29** Ancestor vessel (*wiiso*)

Yungur peoples, Diterra district, early to mid-20th century

Ceramic; H: 58cm (23")

Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva, 1015-115

PHOTO: STUDIO FERRAZZINI BOUCHET, COURTESY OF THE BARBIER-MUELLER MUSEUM, GENEVA

vided shelter from the incursions of invading groups, especially mounted Fulani warriors. The remoteness of the region also meant that local ritual practices were able to persist well into the late twentieth century when they were documented in the field. The arts of eight of the diverse peoples living in this subregion are represented here, with a focus on the Cham-Mwana, Longuda, Jen, Ga'anda, Bana, and Yungur. They live to the west and east of the Gongola River, the largest tributary of the Benue.

The predominance of sculptural ceramic vessels at the center of Upper Benue religious practices represents a marked departure from the wood figures and masks typical of the other two subregions. The highly decorated and anthropomorphized vessels, made primarily by women artists, instead exploit the expressive capacities of clay. Like wood sculpture, ceramic vessels served various ritual functions, including healing the sick, safeguarding hunters and warriors, and activating the presence of various ancestral and protective spirits. Here, as elsewhere, there are striking convergences in the styles and functions of ceramic sculpture mapped among neighboring peoples, revealing the extent of their historical communication and exchange.



Ceramic vessels were conceived to "contain" various kinds of spirit forces. Their shapes typically recall pottery used for domestic purposes but their decoration differs. This is apparent in the ways that they were modeled to *look* human, and were often given heads, faces, arms, and other anatomical details. When molded clay is fired and becomes ceramic, a remarkable shift occurs. Thus, pots like people, owe their existence to irreversible transformations. The decoration of the "skins" of both communicated essential messages about social transitions, such as the inevitable progression from youth to adulthood, revealed in the designs inscribed on the bodies of women as scarification and on the surfaces of vessels in emulation thereof. Such decoration also established links between people and the spirits who were called upon to facilitate positive alterations in human destiny.

The figurative pottery produced by peoples living to the west of the Gongola River was primarily associated with locating, appeasing, or transferring the spirits of disease (see Fig. 5) or the spirits of animals killed in the hunt (or, in the precolonial period, men killed in battle). Healing vessels were commonly used in ritual procedures enacted by Longuda and Cham-Mwana healer-

diviners to transfer the spirits of disease from a patient to a specially made ceramic pot (Fig. 27). Discarded across the rocky terrain after use, Cham-Mwana vessels in particular record the incidence of disease. Many abandoned examples, rendered dangerous after diseases were transferred into them, were field-collected by British colonial officers beginning in the 1950s, often with notations as to their names and associated illnesses. Many others have been subsequently collected. The forms of most have some human reference and describe the symptoms or aspects of particular diseases they were intended to cure.

To the east of the Gongola River, the roles and meanings of figurative ceramic vessels shift to an emphasis on the containment and representation of specific, named spirit deities and of ancestral spirits. The forms and decoration of these vessels are equally distinctive, and they too are modeled to express the visual and conceptual linkages between pots and people and between people and their spirit protectors. The Ga'anda produce several distinctive ceramic vessel types to contain particular spirit forces (Fig. 28), and these are enshrined together in enclosures (named literally, "houses for pots") and maintained by lineage custodians. These pots lead lives like people: their houses need repair, their bodies need washing, and their appetites need satiating. They also look like people, and the raised and incised motifs on the vessels depict patterns of body scarifications on Ga'anda women, as well as tools and weapons carried by men. The identity of each Ga'anda ceramic deity is defined by its shape and decorative program, with the protective spirit being, Mbir'thleng'nda, the most distinctive. Their positive intervention was considered vital to Ga'anda health and well-being.

The Yungur live in a hilly area south of the Ga'anda. They use vessels, called *wiiso*, to contain the spirits of deceased chiefs or village leaders. Always rendered with human heads, the features of the pots are typically individualized to create stylized "portraits." The commanding *wiiso* in the exhibition represents an exceptional category, remarkable for its duplication in several Yungur locations (Fig. 29). It embodies the authority of the first ancestors who arrived from their sacred homeland called Mukan.

In a stunning deviation from the norm, the exhibition concludes with three large and imposing male figures carved in wood that may have functioned as effigies of dead chiefs (Fig. 30), erected during post-burial funerary rites held by a cluster of related Eastern Gongola peoples—the B'ana, Yungur, and Mboi. These rituals were held before the planting season so that the blessings of the deceased could be conferred. Although we know that these rituals were held, nothing resembling these rare and highly muscular male sculptures has been photographed in the Upper Benue region (nor is anything comparable known from the entire Benue River Valley).

**30** Male figure  
Yungur/Mboi/B'ana peoples, 19th century or before  
Wood; H: 110cm (43½")  
Private Collection, Paris  
PHOTO: ©2010, BRIGITTE CAVANAGH

The highly eroded surface of this figure suggests it long predates the twentieth century. Its importance as an effigy of a chiefly ancestor may have been reason to keep it despite its weathered condition. Another related sculpture is in the Menil Collection and the results of radiocarbon dating suggest it is as much as 500 years old. Such figures may have had sanctuary in caves or other protected sites.





The most compelling evidence for the identities of these figures survives in the ceramic vessels made by the Yungur to contain the spirits of deceased chiefs (*wiiso*), of the type included in this exhibition (see Fig. 29). The stylistic similarities in the contours of their heads, facial features, caps, and thick elongated necks are unambiguous. These wooden sculptures may constitute a remnant of a memorial tradition likely abandoned by the 1980s, when Marla Berns did extensive fieldwork in the area, and preserved in the more enduring medium of ceramic. Available evidence prevents us from ascribing a specific ethnic attribution to them even if the “runners” who collected them called them “Mboye (Mboi).” Rather, it seems plausible that the *idea* for such effigies circulated in the Eastern Gongola Valley where related communities of what we know today to be Bana, Yungur, and Mboi peoples shared cultural practices and their material symbols.

The comparative, cross-cultural, and geographical approach that underlies “Central Nigeria Unmasked” is designed to go beyond revelations of style in order to examine the extent to which complex formal and functional correspondences, or even partial connections, can be considered by-products of history. In so doing, the exhibition “unmasks” the dynamic and fluid nature of art and the local spheres of interaction, adaptation, and transformation in which objects have moved. Over the centuries, the Benue River Valley witnessed a confluence of peoples, institutions, and ideas that, on the occasion of this exhibition and accompanying publication, can now be understood as having resulted in one of the major artistic legacies of sub-Saharan Africa.

## DEDICATION

“Central Nigeria Unmasked” is dedicated to the memory of Arnold Rubin (1939–1988), the UCLA art historian who began this project in the 1980s, identifying many of the major collections and objects and preparing a draft manuscript. The curators of the exhibition and authors of the accompanying volume are indebted to his original research and interpretations on which this project builds. Rubin’s ground-breaking field research in the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for many who followed, and itself was inspired by the fieldwork conducted in the 1950s by his mentor, the late Indiana University art historian Roy Sieber (1923–2001) as well as that of Kenneth Murray (1903–1972), the British artist and art teacher who was the founder in 1943 and director of the colonial government’s Department of Antiquities.

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## Notes

This preview article has drawn on the essays written by co-curator Sidney L. Kasfir and other contributing authors to the major publication accompanying the exhibition (see note 3).

1 During Rubin’s field research he collected duplicate sets of objects, one deposited in Nigerian museums, especially the Jos Museum, and one that was eventually donated in large part to the Fowler Museum in 1986 (along with a number of pieces donated in the intervening years). Many of the works constitute a “study” collection of newly carved masks, especially by the Jukun, which are accompanied by invaluable notes and documentation.

2 Additional contributors to the publication include: John Picton, Professor Emeritus, SOAS (Niger-Benue confluence zone and Ebira and Bassa Nge peoples); Mette Bovin, social anthropologist and independent scholar (Mumuye peoples); Joerg Adelberger, social anthropologist and independent scholar (Wurkun peoples); and Nancy Neaher Maas (independent scholar and specialist on Igala casting). Short essays on specific topics have been written by: Hélène Joubert (Chief Curator of African Collections, Musée du quai Branly, 1960s–70s history of Benue collecting); Jean Borgatti, Research Associate, Visual and Performing Arts, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts (Okpella ancestral masquerades); Susan E. Gagliardi, Assistant Professor of Art History, the City College of New York, CUNY (Mumuye masquerades documented by Arnold Rubin); Constanze Weise, PhD candidate, UCLA (Nupe ancestral masquerades); John Willis, Assistant Professor, Carleton College (Oyo Yoruba Egungun masquerades); and Susan Picton (independent scholar; Igala artist, Umale). Two other authors, now deceased, contributed essay

drafts to the original publication organized by Arnold Rubin—John Boston, formerly of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of Hull (Igala peoples); and Barbara Frank, formerly Professor of Anthropology, Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich (Kulere peoples).

3 Historians have in general accepted the Kwara-rafra confederacy, which appears in both the Kano and Bornu Chronicles. Anthropologists, such as John Boston, have been more skeptical.

4 While we can argue that shrine sculpture has been especially vulnerable to these changes, masquerades, since they are also a form of rural entertainment, have been more resilient, especially in the Lower Benue Valley.

5 Horizontal masks are also found in the Lower Benue, including the massive elephant mask (Itrokwu) made by the Idoma. An example carved by the artist Oba, and now in the collection of the Musée du quai Branly, is also included in the exhibition.

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